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UNH Researchers Find Children's Advocacy Centers Are Making A Difference For Abused Children

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DURHAM, N.H. -- An innovative nationwide program to assist child abuse victims really is working, according to new research from the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center.

Children's Advocacy Centers are nonprofit agencies that have been established in more than 500 communities across the country to help make the investigation and prosecution of child abuse easier on child victims.

"CACs are successful in doing much of what they were designed to do," said Lisa Jones, a UNH researcher. "Children at CACs are more likely to get comprehensive medical exams and referrals to mental health services. CACs are getting the police to work together better with the child protection workers. And parents are more satisfied with the job investigators are doing."

The UNH evaluation is the most comprehensive evaluation of Children's Advocacy Centers to date. Data were collected from four communities with CACs – Charleston, SC; Dallas, TX; Huntsville, Ala.; and Pittsburgh, Penn. -- and from communities without CACs for this study.

"This is encouraging, but there's still room for improvement," said Jones. "The study found the programs were far from universal in providing team interviews. Some children and caregivers still had complaints about the process in spite of the innovations." Jones commends CACs on the use of research to improve their work and sees it as a sign of their commitment to helping victims.

Children's Advocacy Centers are designed to improve investigations of child abuse by bringing police, child protection, and medical and mental health professionals together to help families in a child-friendly environment. The first CAC was developed in 1985 and in 2005 more than 600 CACs had been admitted as full or associate members of the National Children's Alliance, the CAC accrediting agency. The Multi-Site Evaluation of CACs, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) was designed to evaluate the impact of CACs on children, families, systems, and communities.

Jones will present the research at the National Children's Alliance Conference May 23-24 in Washington, DC, along with UNH colleagues Ted Cross and Wendy Walsh.